

Homosexuality and Christianity: a personal view

by Adrian Park

Scriptural interpretation forms the basis for a widespread condemnation of homosexuals and homosexuality, even among those members of society for whom religion means little more than a ritual associated with birth, marriage and death. The Scriptural basis rests not on divine revelation, but on human interpretation of certain passages. All Christians interpret Scripture, and interpretations cannot be separated from their secular context.

Homosexuals and homosexuality are not referred to explicitly anywhere in either the Old or New Testaments (OT and NT). This may seem as outrageous statement, but as the terms were only coined by the Hungarian psychologist Kartbeny in 1869, it is strictly correct. Older translations will be searched in vain for an unambiguous reference: have a look at a pre-1860 King James or Douai Bible sometime. What can be found in modern translations of the Bible are passages *interpreted* as referring to what translators believe homosexuality to be.

The first such reference is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16 to 19:29). So ingrained is the traditional interpretation that the "sin of Sodom" and "sodomy" are regarded as virtual synonyms for homosexual practices. The New International Version translates the key passage, where Lot has taken the angelic messengers under his roof and confronts a deputation of townsmen, thus, "They [the Sodomites] called out to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we can have sex with them.'" (Genesis 19:5). Apart from being poor English, this translation conceals the essential ambiguity of this passage. In Hebrew the crowd demand "to know" (*yadha*) the strangers. In ten places in the OT "*yadha*" is used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. In five more places (though not here) it is used in a like manner in conjunction with "*mishkabh*" (to lie). "*Yadha*" is used over 900 times with no sexual connotation at all. Furthermore, the term "*sakhabh*", meaning coition between men or with animals, is widely used when this is the precise meaning required, but is not used here.

Two alternative interpretations can be offered here apart from the traditional one. One accepts the use of "*yadha*" as a euphemism for sexual intercourse, in which case Lot protects the angels from what amounts to threatened gang-rape. Whether this is homosexual or heterosexual rape is irrelevant, rape in general is condemned in the strongest terms repeatedly in the OT and NT. The other interpretation does not see any sexual content in the passage at all. Instead, Lot, who is not a native of Sodom, has allowed strangers to enter the town after curfew and a mob of vigilantes demand to know who they are. The sin here is inhospitality to strangers; itself condemned repeatedly in Scripture. Indeed, the one reference Jesus made to Sodom (Luke 10:10-13) concerns ungodliness manifest by inhospitality to strangers. When Sodom is referred to elsewhere, e.g. Ezekiel 16:49-50, its sins are listed as "pride, fullness of bread, and prosperous ease." coupled with haughtiness and abomination (= *to' ebhah* - the usual term for idolatry). Significantly, the passages elsewhere usually regarded as condemning homosexuality (Lev 18:22, 20:13; Rom 1:26-27; Cor 6:9-10; Tim 1:10) make no reference to Sodom.

When the "Sodom and Gomorrah legend" turns up in other traditions from the Middle East and Levant (e.g. the Bacchus and Philemon legend recounted in Ovid's "Metamorphoses") the cities of the plain are destroyed because of their inhospitality and xenophobia, and the extravagant prosperity of some of their citizens in the face of widespread hardship. Evidence that this interpretation bore some degree of common currency, curiously, comes from England during the first half of the 17th century. In the original King James

translation of Scripture, the terms usually translated as "homosexuality" in modern versions, become "effeminacy" (something presumably, of which only men can be guilty), referring to a love of elaborate and rich clothing rather than mannerisms.

Puritan pamphleteers frequently referred to the defunct Stuart court as the "house of Sodom", and to Cavaliers and Royalists as "sodomites". What is clear from context is that it is Ezekiel's charges that are being made; namely that the Stuart court was sybaritic and given to the ostentatious display of wealth at a time of great economic hardship. When earlier Puritan writers condemned the court of King James I, a flamboyant homosexual who filled patronage appointments in government and at court with handsome young men of limited intelligence or ability, the charges made were of corruption and the abuse of crown patronage. No-one charged James with being a "sodomite", or of running a "house of Sodom."

Elsewhere in the OT, Leviticus alone makes unambiguous reference to homosexual acts, though modern translations litter other books with the term. Much of the codification of the Law in the books of the OT was concerned with eradicating pagan influences from Judaism: idolatry being the most pernicious. When Leviticus (23:22) states "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination", the word used for "abomination" is "*to' ebhah*", signifying idolatry. The Canaanites used fertility rites and one form of votive offering at the temple sites seems to have involved sexual intercourse with temple prostitutes (male and female). Babylonian temples likewise employed prostitutes of both sexes. Leviticus is not making an absolute moral judgement on homosexual practices, he is condemning them in this context because of their association with idolatry. Elsewhere in the OT, when idolaters are called "sodomites" (*gadesh*) and their worship involved some form of sexual rites, translators have assumed the "abomination" was exclusively homosexual, based on the first assumption that the "sin of Sodom" was homosexuality.

The epistles of St. Paul have traditionally been the point of departure for most Christian moral teaching with regards sexuality, with the passages listed above (in Rom., Cor., and Tim.) assumed to refer to what we now call homosexuality. Any consideration of St. Paul's epistles however, is immediately confronted by the problem of authorship and subsequent editing. Many modern scholars refer to these epistles as Pauline and Deutero-Pauline. It is, of course, a matter of debate as to which are St. Paul's originals. Prior to Augustine of Hippo, several divergent traditions vied for the attention of early Christians, most addressed the issue of how human sexuality should be expressed by Christians living in the Roman world. Elaine Pagels' book "Adam, Eve and the Serpent" (see below) gives a highly

readable account of this complex debate. Put simply, Augustine won, and not as a consequence of Divine Intervention, but by the simple expedient of a large bribe to the adjudicator (the Roman Emperor) at a Church Council.

One very influential school of thought took Christ's statements that He would return in glory "before this generation has passed away" completely literally. Sexual activity, even for the purposes of reproduction, was not seen as sinful, it was simply unnecessary, an irrelevance and a distraction. In the OT sense it created a state of ritual impurity. Christians, in this view, should maintain themselves in a state of ritual purity in readiness for the imminent return of the Messiah. Celibacy was clearly the ideal, and this was itself a tradition among such messianic Judaic sects as the Essenes. The Pauline epistles lean to this view, while the Deutero-Pauline texts aim to integrate Christ's teachings with Roman civil law. All the epistles consist of guidance to small, self-sustaining Christian communities, usually consisting of Gentile converts with no Judaic tradition, isolated within a Roman society that seemed inimical, even when it was not actively hostile.

Concerning sexuality, the Pauline epistles are ambiguous. The author(s) clearly regarded celibacy as the ideal; even within marriage. But they regarded marriage as better than licence. This in itself may represent a softening of St. Paul's original teachings. In admitting that celibacy was not practical for everyone, the authors were faced with establishing which norms of Roman society were compatible with Christ's teaching and which were not. Roman society, like that of Greece before it, recognized and accommodated homosexual activity between men within certain bounds. Roman sexual mores were usually concerned with the duties of a citizen, reflecting the teachings of such philosophers as Plato, for whom all sexual acts not leading to reproduction were "unnatural". Roman law permitted "unnatural" acts provided they did not interfere with a citizen's duty to marry and raise a family, or lead to civil disorder. Thus homosexual liaisons for married men were quite permissible, as were such relationships between unmarried men and youths, provided the younger man was adopted as a legal "son" or apprentice.

In this time the more cruel, and to modern eyes, barbaric aspects of Roman society were very evident. In the Roman orgies of popular legend women and slaves, who had no civil rights at all, were subjected to all manner of sexual and sadistic excess. Slaves had no legal right to their children, and child slaves were often sold explicitly for sexual purposes. Civil law only applied to relationships between free citizens (i.e. free men).

Needless to say, neither the Greeks, Romans or St. Paul recognized homosexuality as a distinct human condition. Instead it was seen as a diver-

sionary activity engaged in by married men; women did not enter into anyone's considerations at all. It is this deliberate choice of behavior that is condemned in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline epistles. This condemnation is not addressed to a Roman homosexual community because no such community or concept existed.

That sexual activity of any kind was inherently sinful does not spring directly from the Pauline epistles. It is the bequest of Augustine, Archbishop of Hippo in north Africa, between 395 and 430 AD. It would be no exaggeration to claim that after Jesus Christ and St. Paul, Augustine has been the most influential force in the evolution of Christianity. His teachings and writings form the theological foundations on which the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions rest.

Augustine explicitly identified the original sin of Adam and Eve as sexual. Culpability for this sin was passed down through the generations by sexual intercourse, with semen explicitly identified as the carrier of this spiritual contagion. This was not evidence of some psychological morbidity on his part. What Augustine's writings reveal is a man deeply troubled and concerned about the issue of the human will: specifically, whether it was truly free. To him, the apparently random stirrings of the genitals were evidence of forces acting in humans that were largely outside the control of the will, but evidently under the control of other agencies. To simplify, possible too much, Augustine wondered whether humans were capable of choosing good of their own volition. If he came to accept and then extol a rather dim view of human nature it should be remembered that during his lifetime, the Christianized Roman Empire went into precipitous decline, and the western Empire collapsed completely. Pax Romanum, maintained for nearly 500 years, descended into anarchy. Augustine himself was to die during the Vandal siege of Carthage. He was not to know that a new western Christendom, largely inspired by his own writings, would arise within a few generations, or that the eastern Empire would survive for a further thousand years.

Augustine's writings represent the attempts of an extraordinary intellect to come to terms with the events of his day and to try to understand how these events squared up to the merciful God of the New Testament and the belief in the inevitable triumph of Christianity. For him humanity was fundamentally flawed, and the evidence lay in the fact that even a Christian empire had succumbed to barbarians. Human will was fundamentally compromised, and mankind's only hope for salvation lay in the institutional Church. The most potent sign of this fallen nature lay in human sexuality. For a justification of his conclusions he fell back on the teachings of Plato and the Pauline epistles, formulating the basis for the RC doctrine on original sin, and the Calvinist doctrine of predestination.

What is often forgotten is that such esteemed Christian teachers as John Chrysostom, Pelagius and Julian of Alexandria vehemently opposed Augustine's analysis.

Since Augustine's day the rational understanding of the human condition and man's place in the Universe has changed dramatically. We do not, for instance, consider the autonomy of the digestive tract to be evidence of diabolic interference. Over the centuries Christian theologians have attempted to incorporate the basic ethical and moral precepts of Christ's teachings into a changing secular world. Without compromising principles, interpretations have changed to meet changing conditions. No Christian sect now interprets Scriptural injunctions against usury to debar Christians from working in or using the services of banks. No Christian sect would justify slavery, yet all lived quite happily with it until the humanist philosophers of the Enlightenment changed opinion. The Quakers and Mennonites are almost alone in regarding the fifth commandment as a justification for pacifism. There are no specifically Christian versions of the structure of the atom or DNA, and the mainstream churches are even comfortable with Darwinian evolution and the geological time scale. Modern understanding of sexuality remains largely taboo, with homosexuality constituting a particularly forbidden enclave.

Whether Scripture represents the revealed Work of God or not is irrelevant to this issue. The Bible as we know it today, and the moral and ethical teachings derived from it, are the product of several thousand years of human endeavor. It is a dynamic and evolving process demanding good faith on behalf of the participants. There is no place in it for hatred, fear and ignorance.

Taken out of context, the more blood-thirsty passages of the OT have been used, over the last two thousand years, to justify all manner of inhumanity. Witchburning, the stoning of female adulterers, the flogging of prostitutes, even slavery, apartheid and genocide have been justified with Scriptural authority. Thankfully, as western society has changed, moral values and their interpretation have also evolved. If Catholic and Protestant authorities justified torture and witchburning, it was Christian humanism in both sects that ultimately brought about their demise. Principles remain, but interpretations change.

Sources

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